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Author(s): Frank Trentmann

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Frank Trentmann

## **Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption**

If there is one agreement between theorists of modernity and those of post-modernity, it is about the centrality of consumption to modern capitalism and contemporary culture. To thinkers as different as Werner Sombart, Emile Durkheim and Thorstein Veblen at the turn of the twentieth century, consumption was a decisive force behind modern capitalism, its dynamism and social structure. More recently, Anthony Giddens has presented consumerism as simultaneous cause and therapeutic response to the crisis of identities emanating from the pluralization of communities, values and knowledge in ‘post-traditional society’. Post-modernists like Baudrillard have approached consumption as the semiotic code constituting post-modernity itself: ultimately, signs are consumed, not objects. Such has been the recent revival of theoretical interest in consumption that the historian might feel acutely embarrassed by the abundance of choice and the semiotic and, indeed, political implications of any particular approach. Which theory is most appropriate for the historical study of ‘consumer society’? What is being consumed, by whom, why, and with what consequence differs fundamentally in these writings: should we study objects, signs or experiences, focus on the drive to emulate others or to differentiate oneself, analyse acquisitive mentalities or ironic performances, condemn resulting conformity or celebrate subversion?

It is helpful to note that the theoretical debate about consumption in the last two decades has in the main been driven by a philosophical engagement with ‘modernity’ (or its disappearance), not by an empirical reassessment of the historical dynamics of consumption; in stark contrast with, say, Sombart’s earlier empirical work on luxury, or the Frankfurt School’s research into mass society. The changing pictures of consumption thus followed on a changing assessment of ‘modernity’, not vice versa, and this theoretical dynamic inevitably had a decisive effect on how consumption and the consumer are portrayed in these texts. We encounter the ‘modern consumer’, the ‘traditional consumer’ and the ‘post-modern consumer’ as ideal-typical constructs. These may be well suited to provide commentary on the condition of ‘modernity’ or ‘post-modernity’. They are less helpful for a historical understanding of

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consumption, since they present holistic, static and finished end-products rather than problematize how (and whether) these different types have emerged, developed, and stood in relation to each other in different societies at different times.

What, then, should be the unit of enquiry for historical research? Should we write a history of 'consumerism' or 'consumer society', of 'consumption regimes' or 'consumer culture'? Historians have largely sidestepped this interpretive problem. The prolonged debate about the merit of 'class' and 'society' shows that this is not because the profession is theory-challenged. Far from it, it might be argued that 'consumer society' or 'consumerism' have been adopted just as 'class society' became problematic. One reason for this conceptual silence may be found in the formative split between the two principal approaches to consumption in the first wave of historical studies in the late 1970s and 1980s, a split that has effectively limited the contribution of history to the broader debate about consumption in the social sciences and humanities. Two largely self-referential enterprises emerged. One project traced the birth of 'modern consumer society' in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Europe and the Atlantic world. The second focused on shopping and mass consumption, particularly the late nineteenth-century department store. These selective enterprises not only ignored many other forms, sites and meanings of consumption, but the temporal gulf between them disguised the incommensurability of their respective notions of modernity. Historians interested in the former project turned to the 'modern' acquisitive desire for commodities and 'novelties' amongst a broadening middling sort and some artisans. Historians working on the latter, by contrast, argued that a modern consumer society only developed once the large bulk of society, freed from the regime of needs, was able to enter a system of ever-expanding goods and desires. The conceptual and empirical gulf between the two groups was deepened further by different methodological upbringings, the first steeped in anthropology and culture, the latter in social history and gender studies. Whereas historians of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Holland and Britain worked with a theory of culture inspired, in part, by Durkheim and Mary Douglas, where 'need' is as much a cultural construct as 'desire', writers privileging the twentieth century often employed an essentialist definition of needs that stood in stark contrast with the 'culture' of consumerism. In short, here was a disagreement about the very essence of human existence and culture.

The theoretical divide underlying the chronological gulf in studies of consumption was deepened by competing national traditions of historiography. In Germany, the belated turn to consumption emerged from within the Weberian development of social history as *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Rather than being present at the birth of modernity, consumption here was one of its offspring; and even then (like other cultural subjects) it was less a subject in its own right than a source of answers to questions about class and status.<sup>1</sup> Hence the

1 E.g. H.-U. Wehler in a paper on 'Deutsches Bürgertum nach 1945' at Bielefeld University, June

almost iconic status of Bourdieu (rather than, say, Baudrillard) in German history seminars. Bourdieu's treatment of taste and consumption in the formation of habitus can be easily accommodated within *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*; after all, Bourdieu's idea of 'the choice of the necessary', though not economic in the strict sense, continues to present the 'habitus' of the working class as the learned outcome of their material situation.<sup>2</sup> In North America, by contrast, the recent revival of interest in consumption has been driven by a very different historiographical dynamic: the disillusionment with social history, especially with the 'working class', and the shift to gender and post-structuralism. Instead of producing 'false' needs, new sites of consumption, such as the department store, offered opportunities for an emancipation of the self and the transgression of dominant gender hierarchies. The late Victorian metropole suddenly exhibited some of the very features of post-modernity *avant la lettre*.

If the strategy of *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* was to use consumption to buttress social history by showing just how subtle and distinctly 'modern' class and status were, feminist and post-structuralist approaches turned to consumption to question the very notion of modernity underlying social history. Either way, consumption was instrumentalized. It was not the principal subject or problem. Interest in consumption remained highly selective and fragmented. The department store spoke to questions about the gendering of public spaces, identities and desires. Advertising spoke to questions about semiotics. There were few connections here with the historiography on food, leisure and fashion.<sup>3</sup> There was little dialogue with the fresh and expanding literature in anthropology and geography exploring systems of provision, material culture, life-histories and the processes and spaces connected to consumption before and after purchase.<sup>4</sup> The synergy between the social sciences, history and the arts that had fostered studies of the birth of the consumer society stands in stark contrast to the situation for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup>

2001, now in H.-U. Wehler (ed.), *Konflikte zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Munich 2003), chap.

9. For a different kind of social history in Germany, see W. Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* (New York 1992; orig. 1980).

2 As the sociologist Don Slater has observed, this 'is a disappointing conclusion, one that recapitulates some now familiar prejudices and wishful thinking — that somehow the working class (or women or others) are unclouded by ideology (or by 'mythology' in Barthes) because they are compelled by real necessity, by a functional relation to things, or because they know things through direct labour, through their hands'. *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge 1997), 163.

3 For important exceptions, see P. Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge 1998); F. Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-century Britain* (London 1996) and C. Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860–1914* (Manchester 1999).

4 D. Miller (ed.), *Acknowledging Consumption* (London 1995), which remains the best critical entry into debates in the social sciences and humanities. See also now the second edition of Ben Fine, *The World of Consumption* (London 2002).

5 Synergy that is well reflected in J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London 1993).

There were simply too few historical building blocks for a general debate about the changing physiology of 'modern consumer society' in its subsequent adolescence, maturity or old age, let alone for a general historical narrative.

The aim of this article is to outline some of the questions that may help structure such a debate. Should we think in terms of a linear expansion of western consumerism ending in global convergence? What was the underlying dynamic of this expansion and where should we locate its modernity? What was the place of consumption in social and political relations, and what do these connections (and disconnections) tell us about the nature of 'consumer society'? More broadly, what are the meanings of consumption and what should historians include or exclude? 'Consumerism' and 'modern consumer society', it will be argued, are concepts with diminishing analytical and conceptual usefulness that have privileged a particular western version of modern consumption at the expense of the multi-faceted and often contradictory workings of consumption in the past and are increasingly at odds with the current debate about the cultures and politics of consumption.

Despite the explosion of books on subjects related to consumption in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many studies address self-sufficient communities rather than engaging in a shared dialogue. In an insightful article five years ago, Peter Stearns observed the lack of connection between discussions of early modern and modern consumer society and turned to a stage theory to link the two.<sup>6</sup> Stage one witnessed the emergence of consumerist desire in early modern Europe and focused on dress and household items. Stage two saw the expansion of consumerism in the mid-late nineteenth century and was marked by a profusion of goods and leisure, the proliferation of retail outlets, and the spread of consumerist values into social spheres as diverse as child-rearing and pornography. As Stearns acknowledged, such a simple two-stage model called for a sharper periodization and more regional diversification. *Consumerism in World History* is the result of his further reflections and extends his question about European stages to the rest of the world. The geographic extension of the subject, however, was not accompanied by a rethinking of the underlying assumptions of western modernity. What is distinctive about modern society, Stearns reiterates, is 'consumerism', defined as the lure of material goods. This consumerism first emerged in eighteenth-century Western Europe, and from there was exported to the rest of the globe. The thesis follows directly from two interrelated a priori ways of viewing the subject: the definition of an acquisitive individualist mentality as the defining feature of modern consumer behaviour and, since this originated in the West, a view of expansion that looks from the epi-centre (West) outwards. Both of these views are open to question.

'Consumerism', for Stearns, 'describes a society in which many people

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6 P. Stearns, 'Stages of Consumerism: Recent Work on the Issues of Periodization', *Journal of Modern History*, 69 (1997), 102–17.

formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or for traditional display.<sup>7</sup> Analytically this collapses different units of enquiry. Consumerism appears as mentality, behavioural motivation and individual action, as well as commercial institutions and a defining feature of society at large. It is problematic to read back from increased consumer spending the dominance of consumerist mentalities. For many people, it might be very 'necessary' for subsistence to purchase a car in suburban America, because of the lack of public transport and a dispersed socio-economic and cultural infrastructure, not because of a consumerist definition of one's goals in life.<sup>8</sup> Does this make these Americans more consumerist than the privileged citizens of New York or London or Tokyo who can forgo car purchase because they have the spending power to purchase a centrally-located flat? The acquisitive, materialist focus of 'consumerism' neglects the significance of forms and modes of consumption which do not centre on the commercial purchase of goods, such as visits to a club or museum, and the consumption of services and experiences more generally. Even shopping, that most basic form of consumption, involves a variety of functions from voyeurism to a search for 'authentic sociality'; Daniel Miller's ethnographic studies in London have noted 'how shoppers struggle to make specific purchases that will not just reflect but act directly upon the contradictions they constantly face between the normative discourse that tells them who they and their family members should be, and how they find them in their specificity as individuals'.<sup>9</sup> Consumption can be about managing familial and social relationships, not merely self-centred acquisitiveness.

The first consequence of the narrow concept of 'consumerism' is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy. Stearns finds what he is looking for: materialist consumerism as a key feature of western modernity. A less tautological approach would have been to compare acquisitive consumerist behaviour with the full spectrum of forms of consumption and their motivations; there is little here about alternative radical, social-democratic or nationalist consumer politics, and what there is is viewed only in terms of resistance to consumerism. Yet, alternative visions of consumption have often been integral to the very shape and development of capitalist societies; for example, through the popular Free Trade movement in Victorian and Edwardian Britain which was driven by ideals of the citizen-consumer and dark fears of alien materialism and excess.<sup>10</sup>

7 P. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London 2001), ix.

8 E.g. see J.M. Segal, 'Consumer Expenditures and the Growth of Need-required Income' in D. Crocker and T. Linden (eds), *Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship* (Lanham 1998), 176–97; and the debate in J. Schor (ed.), *Do Americans Shop Too Much? A New Democracy Forum* (Boston 2000).

9 D. Miller, *The Dialectics of Shopping* (Chicago 2001), 55f.

10 See F. Trentmann, 'Civil Society, Commerce and the "Citizen Consumer": Popular Meanings of Free Trade in Modern Britain' in F. Trentmann (ed.), *Paradoxes of Civil Society: New Perspectives on Modern German and British History* (New York 2003), 2nd edn, 306–31; F. Trentmann, 'National Identity and Consumer Politics: Free Trade and Tariff Reform' in D. Winch



To group contemporary mobilization under 'anti-consumer protests' misses the attraction of different approaches to consumption and the contribution of consumer movements in the European Union and, with lesser success, more globally to a widening transnational system of trade regulations.<sup>11</sup>

The second consequence is to reinforce a sharp dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern' society, East and West, societies defined by reciprocity and status versus societies driven by individualism and markets.<sup>12</sup> Just as the consumerist fixation obscures the diverse forms and alternative modernities of consumption shaping western societies (which include reciprocity), so it reinforces a picture of less dynamic, 'traditional' societies in the East (ignoring their economic dynamism). As for the modern West, so for the traditional East, the cultural dynamics shaping subsistence and what sociologists have termed 'ordinary consumption' is simply bracketed.<sup>13</sup> For the early modern period, Stearns thus grants China the display of expensive goods and high quality cloth, but these, he argues, were isolated instances of luxury, limited to the very wealthy, and incorporated into traditional styles and values. Eastern tradition, in other words, killed the dynamic energy of consumerism and the ever-changing tastes and goods this set free in the West.

This equation of tradition with a lack of dynamism side-steps the considerable significance of consumption to social order and change in non-western societies. In the Mughal empire, 'a great king was a great consumer', in Chris Bayly's words.<sup>14</sup> Legitimacy of rule depended on a diversity of styles and the encouragement of artisans and traders to produce them. It was not any absence of fashion or diverse and changing tastes that marked the principal difference between this phase of 'archaic globalisation' (Bayly) and later global consumption systems, but the push towards uniform, standardized goods in the latter. Even more than India, China in the Ming period exhibits plenty of examples of what Veblen would later term 'conspicuous consumption'.<sup>15</sup> At the level of popular consumption, more people consumed everyday luxuries like tea and sugar in eighteenth-century China than in eighteenth-century Europe outside England. Nor was European consumption at this

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and P.K. O'Brien (eds), *The Political Economy of British Historical Experience, 1688–1914* (Oxford 2002), 215–42; E. Furlough and C. Strikwerda (eds), *Consumerism against Capitalism?* (Oxford 1999).

11 D. Vogel, *Trading Up: Consumer and Environmental Regulation in a Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA 1995).

12 For critiques, see A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge 1986), 3–63; M. Bevir and F. Trentmann (eds), *Markets in Historical Contexts: Ideas and Politics in the Modern World* (Cambridge 2004).

13 J. Gronow and A. Warde (eds), *Ordinary Consumption* (London 2001).

14 C.A. Bayly, 'The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700–1930' in Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, op. cit., 300 and C.A. Bayly, '“Archaic” and “Modern” Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, c. 1750–1850' in A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London 2002), 47–73.

15 G. Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Chicago 1991).

stage marked by some distinctive, uninterrupted development. As Kenneth Pomeranz has emphasized, a conventional contrast between a 'normal' European trend of continued expansion and a defective pattern of interrupted growth in luxury consumption elsewhere is undermined by evidence that European consumption levels remained static during a period of overall economic growth in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The advance of Western Europe might have had less to do with some original European revolution of consumerist desire than with other sources, such as access to coal and the exploitation of the New World.

Attention to parallels and contingency in the earlier period might also radically shift our understanding of contemporary global consumption. For Stearns, the question of consumption in Asia and Africa is one of reception and degrees of resistance. In what is perhaps the most ambitious part of the book, Stearns turns to religion to explain where the tidal wave of consumerism swamped societies and where it has been blocked or channelled into different directions. Where a rival value system with strong notions of otherworldliness existed, as with Confucianism in China or Islam in the Middle East, advance was slow. Where no such alternative value system existed, as in sub-Saharan Africa, consumerism advanced more easily. How consumption relates to other value systems and moral institutions is an important question that deserves more comparative analysis. Yet, the reduction of consumerism into an acquisitive mentality might unnecessarily cast consumption and religion as competing self-defining universes. Why presume that an expanding consumer society requires a decline in religious intensity? 'In the West', Stearns argues, 'consumerism rose amongst powerful strains of Christianity, but in an atmosphere where religious intensity, on the whole, was in decline.'<sup>17</sup> This is curious. For in Britain, that paradigm of the first consumer society, religious intensity was steadily increasing in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; evangelicals might have stressed the link between Christianity and commerce but they remained vocal opponents of consumerism. As with Victorian Britain, so with postwar Japan, there is an implicit assumption about the rival forces of 'markets' and 'culture' at work. Stearns is surely right about the pressure of Americanization in postwar Japan, yet, again, the contrast between traditional values and an alien individualist materialism misses much that is most interesting and distinctive about Japanese consumption. For millions of housewives who made up the Japanese consumer movement, consumption was embedded within a larger universe of civic values that blended ideas of citizenship, national identity and the organic interest of producers and consumers.<sup>18</sup>

16 K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ 2000), 117–22. Cf. Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'The Great Divergence', *Past and Present*, vol. 176 (2002).

17 Stearns, *Consumerism*, op. cit., 112.

18 P. Maclachlan, *Consumer Politics in Postwar Japan* (New York 2002). See also L.C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York 2000).



How much global convergence is there around consumerism? Stearns points to pockets of resistance, Islamic revival, the indigenization of goods, blending of styles, and uneven distribution of wealth and leisure, but on the whole his evidence, from Disney to Pokemon, suggests the steady global advance of consumerism. Stearns, in a concluding reflection on 'Who wins?', is careful to balance an older élitist critique of mass consumption with an emphasis that for many people consumption serves 'social and personal interests . . . [and] is not, always, as shallow as it seems'.<sup>19</sup> Yet, again, the tendency to reduce consumption to a materialist acquisition of goods by individuals makes it difficult to explore the multi-faceted workings of consumption in society and politics. Consumerism erodes identities and can disorient individuals, it is argued, even though it does not necessarily mean a complete surrender to 'western values'. Consumerism, measured in a rise in material standards, ceases to add happiness in established consumer societies. Stearns' book might be read most profitably as a final twentieth-century reflection working within an older tradition of historical sociology, reaching back to Weber, turning to materialist consumerism as a way of explaining the rise of the West. Yet consumption in the late twentieth century has become as much about services, experiences, and citizenship as about the acquisition of goods. In Britain, to take a society where this shift in discourse, practice and identity advanced especially rapidly in the 1990s, consumption and consumers entered the workings of such diverse spheres as health care, transport and government. The postwar consumer movement is on the verge of becoming a citizens' movement. The older model of 'consumerism', which, after all, originated with an élitist and academic critique of mass consumer society, is ill-equipped to penetrate the different transmutations of consumption in society.<sup>20</sup> Weber's fear of a '*Genussmensch ohne Herz*' (hedonist without heart) and Marcuse's later 'one-dimensional man' consumed by a compulsive desire to purchase goods, were important chapters in the history of ideas. They may not be the best analytical tools to come to grips with contemporary developments, where consumer identities have become suffused with questions of civic participation, cultural identities, and social and global justice, as well as with a drive to acquire goods.

Social differentiation and uneven penetration is the contrasting theme of Heinz-Gerhard Haupt's critical survey of *Konsum und Handel* in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Haupt puts South-Western and Eastern Europe back into a story normally dominated by their north-western neighbours. Whereas 'consumerism' presumes the growing autonomy of a consumerist mentality, Haupt's approach is more concerned with consumption as a process

19 Stearns, *Consumerism*, op. cit., 141.

20 This argument is at odds with U. Wyrwa's idea that '“consumer society” can be a useful analytical concept only if it preserves its original critical impulse and takes consumption's destructive aspects into account'. 'Consumption and Consumer Society' in S. Strasser, C. McGovern and M. Judd (eds), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge 1998), 447. See also M. Prinz (ed.), *Der lange Weg in den Überfluss: Anfänge und Entwicklung der Konsumgesellschaft seit der Vormoderne* (Paderborn 2003).

and its role in stabilizing or eroding social solidarities. This has three related analytical advantages. First, it gives as much attention to food and clothing as to more spectacular forms of consumption. Second, it rightly insists on the importance of scarcity as well as abundance in the making of consumer societies, and on the contribution of the state. Finally, it situates consumption in important non-commercial settings, like the household and public spaces, as well as in retailing.

Haupt argues for a categorical distinction between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century Europe was a 'consumer society', a social context in which a particular set of goods was available to certain groups who used them for self-representation. Twentieth-century 'mass consumer society' was qualitatively different, not only because an expanding set of goods became accessible to more people, but because 'distinction' through possession was becoming more complex as consumption became connected with many more social, political and cultural formations.<sup>21</sup> Haupt offers a kaleidoscopic picture of 'consumer society' giving due space to differences between regions, generations, genders and professions. If there is little doubt about the general upward trend in the consumption of meat and alcohol, the picture remains one of sharp divergence across Europe well into the twentieth century. Skilled workers in France enjoyed lean meat while their unskilled brethren remained dependent on offal. In Spain, many were facing famine after the drought of 1905. In rural Austria, coffee only became part of the diet after the second world war.

Nor was the triumph of 'modern', nationally-integrated markets over 'traditional' subsistence systems complete in early twentieth-century Europe. In Italy, less than one-third of all farms produced for the market as late as the 1930s. Again, the increase in real wages and disposable income in the late nineteenth century, well established for Britain, France, Germany and Sweden, was a far from general European phenomenon, side-stepping much of the Habsburg empire. Even in the 1950s, 60 per cent of income was spent on food and drink in Southern and Eastern Europe, a figure already left behind in Britain and amongst skilled workers in Germany by the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup> Even for North-Western Europe, this is not a simple narrative of modernization. The arrival of the department store proceeded parallel to a rise in the number of travelling salesmen and hawkers.<sup>23</sup> And the spread of the department store was not an automatic reaction to urbanization and industrialization either — comparatively, France was advanced in the first, but not in the latter. Here, as elsewhere, Haupt's sensibility as a comparativist sheds fresh light on old subjects, urging future research to leave the nation state as the

21 H.-G. Haupt, *Konsum und Handel: Europa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 2002), 20f.

22 Ibid., 25, 26, 29.

23 See also M. Finn, 'Scotch Drapers and the Politics of Modernity: Gender, Class and National Identity in the Victorian Tally Trade' in Daunton and Hilton, *Politics of Consumption*, op. cit., 89–107.

natural unit of enquiry and instead to compare phenomena across societies, such as the distinct conditions that favoured the emergence of particular retail organizations in some cities but not in others.

How consumption relates to collective identities and social solidarities has been a subject more extensively explored by sociologists and anthropologists than by historians. Haupt's short reflections on consumption in relation to gender, ethnicity and nation are thus welcome; generational changes, so crucial to current debates,<sup>24</sup> are a subject historians have yet to explore more fully. Normative discourses of separate gender roles did not necessarily match social realities of consumption — some men did cook — but they set the framework in which consumers oriented themselves. At the same time, the identification of women as consumers also opened up new spaces of action, as in the department store, and, we might add, in civil society more broadly, especially through the expanding network of co-operative women at the turn of the twentieth century, where questions of consumption and citizenship were intimately linked.<sup>25</sup>

The transformation of Europe into a 'mass consumer society' in the course of the twentieth century is the theme of the second half of Haupt's study. Here again, the emphasis is as much on limits as on triumphs, and on ruptures as much as linear expansion. Scarcities and rationing during and after the two world wars receive as much attention as the growing consumer spending on furniture, clothing and entertainment. The reader is reminded of the social exclusion that continues to keep the material dreams of consumerism out of reach of large segments of European societies, not least pensioners and single mothers. Throughout, *Konsum und Handel* situates changing trends within the broader social contexts of economic growth and welfare patterns.

Recognition of the multiple and often divergent functions and meanings of consumption raises questions about the very usefulness of working with two large ideal-typical systems of 'consumer society' and 'mass consumer society'. The picture of a nineteenth-century 'consumer society' emerges more ambivalent than the concept signals. It suggests boundedness and fractures rather than any unstoppable or defining social system. As a dominant social formation it was limited to particular regions and cities as well as to particular classes. There may have been growing consumption, but very few societies and social solidarities had yet become defined by the practices or mentalities

24 B. Gunter, *Understanding the Older Consumer: The Grey Market* (London 1998); P. Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford 2000); J. Vincent, 'Consumers, Identity and Old Age', *Education and Ageing*, 14, 2 (1999), 141–58; M. Nava and A. McRobie (eds), *Gender and Generation* (London 1984); Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing* (London 1993); B. Gunter and A. Furnham, *Children as Consumers: A Psychological Analysis of the Young People's Market* (London 1998).

25 F. Trentmann, 'Bread, Milk and Democracy: Consumption and Citizenship in Twentieth-century Britain' in Daunt and Hilton, *Politics of Consumption*, op. cit., 129–63; G. Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London 1998).

associated with it. Just as it is debatable to speak of a 'class society' if its members do not principally define themselves in terms of class, so we might ask when it was that individuals and groups came to define themselves as 'consumers'. Though the economic use of the term can be traced back to rare instances in the early eighteenth century, the 'consumer' as a distinctive identity, as a form of self-description by individuals and groups and as a universal category of ascription and analysis by business, politics and academia only appears to have come fully into its own in mid-, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and North America. Even then, the neo-classical view of the rational, utility-maximizing individual that emerged out of the marginalist revolution of the 1870s was not the only (or the principal) representation of 'the consumer' competing for social and political attention at the turn of the twentieth century. To many radicals and liberals, 'consumers' were informed, ethical users of necessities, performing important civic roles, as in J.A. Hobson's image of the 'citizen-consumer' in Edwardian Britain or in the work of the National Consumers' League (NCL) to improve working conditions and civil rights in early twentieth-century America.<sup>26</sup> A more open, descriptive and less normative definition of 'consumer', based on the act of purchase rather than its underlying motivation or set of commodities, appears a rarer, second stage, such as when the NCL in 1925 proclaimed that 'every person who buys anything, from a bun to a yacht, is a consumer'.<sup>27</sup>

Greater attention to contested meanings of the consumer in societies with different political traditions and socio-economic dynamics might tell us much about the changing salience of 'consumer society'.<sup>28</sup> In South Korea, for example, where the second half of the 1980s alone saw a 75 per cent real increase in the rate of consumption expenditure, a public debate developed about 'excessive consumers'. Yet polls asking South Koreans to identify where they thought that excessive consumption lay in their everyday lives, produced children's education at the top of the list, above leisure and travel.<sup>29</sup> The

26 K.K. Sklar, 'The Consumer's White Label Campaign of the National Consumers' League' in Strasser et al., *Getting and Spending*, op. cit., 17–35; F. Trentmann, 'Civil Society, Commerce and the "Citizen Consumer"' in Trentmann, *Paradoxes*, op. cit., 306–31; N. Thomson, 'Social Opulence, Private Asceticism' in Daunt and Hilton, *Politics of Consumption*, op. cit., 51–68. E. Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France. The Politics of Consumption, 1834–1930* (Ithaca 1991).

27 In the NCL's official history, as quoted in L. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumer's League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, NC 2000), 22.

28 See P. MacLachlan and F. Trentmann, 'Civilising Markets: Traditions of Consumer Politics in Twentieth-century Japan, Britain, and America' in M. Bevir and F. Trentmann (eds), *Markets in Historical Contexts*, op. cit., chap. 9.

29 With 23.5 per cent for education, and 19.8 per cent for entertainment, leisure and travel, and well below, durables with a mere 8.7 per cent; from a 1993 national survey cited in S. Kim, 'Changing Lifestyles and Consumption Patterns of the South Korean Middle-class and New Generations' in C. Beng-Huat (ed.), *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities* (London 2000), 71f.

meaning of 'consumption' and the identity of the 'consumer' and its place in social and political processes here is a radically different one from that in the luxury debates of eighteenth-century imperial Britain, or well-known western debates about mass consumer culture and 'conspicuous consumption' in the early twentieth century, premised on a binary of *Bildung*/culture versus consumption/leisure.

How uniform and distinctive is European 'mass consumer society', the ideal-type used by Haupt for the twentieth century? Is there sufficient coherence and similarity amongst patterns of consumption in the last half-century to make this term as useful for the 1990s as for the 1950s? Here Haupt follows, on the one hand, Hartmut Kaelble's argument for a general trend of convergence, even though pointing to disruptive moments and qualitative shifts (from class to life-style) and, on the other, Victoria de Grazia's seminal distinction between an American 'consumption regime' characterized by individual choice in the marketplace and a European regime where consumer citizenship is sought through social participation and economic redistribution via the state.<sup>30</sup> It is debatable how well these two arguments fit with the analysis of a 'mass consumer society'. These ideal-typical distinctions might capture particular dimensions of consumption in particular societies at particular times while obscuring alternative developments at others; growing awareness of the limited significance of Fordist 'mass' production suggests caution about models of 'mass' consumption.<sup>31</sup> European developments in the twentieth century might be even more diverse than Haupt allows. First, it can be argued that the 'European model' contained different types of political organization and economic redistribution through which consumer citizenship was exercised — focusing more on civil society at the turn of the twentieth century and to some degree again at the turn of the twenty-first, but on the state in the period in between. Second, the consumption of social and public services (from welfare to culture) should be a more integral part of the analysis of 'mass consumer society'. Groups suffering from social exclusion and low income, for example, may very well be left out of a consumerist dream world, but they nonetheless are significant consumers of other things — water, social housing, education, television and so forth. Even for more privileged consumers, the place and force of mass consumption (through markets) will remain inadequately explained unless it is connected to a study of the changing provision and understanding of public services; the presence of consumer discourse and practices in health care, to take one example, is pronounced in Britain. Some consumer movements argue that the contrast between 'choice'

30 H. Kaelble, 'Europäische Besonderheiten des Massenkonsums' in H. Siegrist, H. Kaelble and J. Kocka (eds), *Europäische Konsumgeschichte: Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums* (Frankfurt/Main 1998), 169–204; V. de Grazia, 'Changing Consumption Regimes in Europe, 1930–1970' in Strasser, *Getting and Spending*, op. cit., 59–83.

31 See J.A. Tooze, 'Endless Possibilities? Historical Alternatives to Mass Production Fifteen Years On', *Social History*, 25 (2000), 247–50.

and political organization that underlies the ideal-typical contrast between America and Europe was a false choice in the first place and can be overcome. Transnational trends, not least through European integration and consumer advocacy, make for different regulations and possibilities in the sphere of consumption to-day from those in the first half of the twentieth century, often eroding the autonomous powers of states.

So far we have discussed the attraction (and limitations) of distinguishing between different large-scale systems (consumerism, consumer society, mass consumer society). Yet how to account for the dynamism generated by consumption in societies in transition from one system to another? For societies in Northern and Western Europe, this question is especially pertinent for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, partly because of growing overall purchasing power, but even more so because of the changing institutions, practices and sensibilities of consumption. The transformation of retailing was the engine of this change. Recognition of its centrality, however, has generally been framed through a narrow definition of modernity. The department store, in particular, has become synonymous with the rise of 'modern' consuming practices and sensibilities. The department store, which began to dot the urban landscape of Europe in the last third of the nineteenth century, owes part of its image as a pioneer of modernity to being contrasted with an atavistic, backward-looking and older community of small retailers. This negative assessment, Uwe Spiekermann argues convincingly in *Basis der Konsumgesellschaft*, needs to be historicized as a construct inherited from earlier academic and party-political contestation in imperial Germany. Gustav Schmoller, the doyen of the historical school of political economy, deliberately downplayed the contribution of retailers to German modernization in order to highlight that of the German state.<sup>32</sup>

Between 1867 and 1910 shops expanded by 512 per cent in Germany, a greater rate of increase than that of the population (343 per cent). These numbers, Spiekermann shows, hide a tremendous evolution and diversification of retailing. Instead of the caricature of the *gemütliche*, single shopkeeper, a spectrum of shops and retailing forms emerge, from the *Magazin* and travelling depots (*Wanderlager*), to itinerant traders and chain stores. The department store was merely one amongst several functional responses to the commercialization of society and one that incorporated evolutionary changes first developed in other settings. As Spiekermann points out, the department store in Germany was not only small in terms of material significance, with less than 2.5 per cent of retail sales on the eve of the first world war, but its fragmented lay-out, such as different cashiers for different parts of each floor, discouraged the emergence of the '*flâneur*', the rambling and browsing shopper.<sup>33</sup>

32 U. Spiekermann, *Basis der Konsumgesellschaft: Entstehung und Entwicklung des modernen Kleinhandels in Deutschland, 1850–1914* (München 1999).

33 Ibid., 381.



Diversification and differentiation, not concentration, emerge as the engines of modernity. Spiekermann's principal historiographical aim is to write retailing back into narratives of modern German history. He recovers very different 'modern' forms of retailing, many of which fit poorly a Weberian image of modernization — an observation that can be extended to other spheres of consumer culture, such as advertising.<sup>34</sup> Communal experiments with centralizing sales in marketing halls could not compete successfully with the small shops and street traders who worked closer to customers and offered more attractive sales and credit. The *Wanderlager*, often decried by contemporaries as the very essence of shoddiness, here are reassessed for their modernizing potential: they developed efficient business structures, commercialized rural areas and distributed the surplus of industrial society in the form of remainders. The study thus complements the recent rediscovery of 'modern' elements of shopping in arcades and shop-windows in the early modern period.<sup>35</sup> Looking ahead, it should also encourage a more ecumenical appreciation of the persistence of rival retailing practices and spaces, including street markets, second-hand consumption, car-boot sales and charity shops.<sup>36</sup> There needs to be more exchange between theorists, sociologists and historians, before any transition to 'post-modern' or 'post-traditional' consumer culture can be meaningful.

The modernizing force of retailing partly lay in its heterogeneity and its ability to learn from rival challenges. Rather than presenting organizations and movements locked in ideological conflict, Spiekermann focuses on processes of collective learning. The battle between consumer co-operatives and profit-oriented shopkeepers thus becomes a story of successful adaptation, as the latter formed purchase federations on the model of the former to benefit from economies of scale. Far from lagging behind, retail continued to outspend industry on advertisement well into the interwar years, and far from being passive outlets for industry's products, small shops emerge as a vital source of marketing. Shopkeepers not only adjusted their display and (increasingly finished) goods with a view to a particular social clientèle, but this differentiation went hand in hand with a growing routinization of communication and sales techniques within the shop. Professionalization and sales-training self-consciously advanced this process. Customers and retailers alike

34 The infant profession of advertising had to manoeuvre within a cross-fire of competing projects of modernity and tradition, and its successful expansion depended partly on its ability to incorporate some traditional criticism, for example by championing aesthetic communication; see C. Lamberty, *Reklame in Deutschland, 1890–1914: Wahrnehmung, Professionalisierung und Kritik der Wirtschaftswerbung* (Berlin 2000).

35 See C. Walsh, 'The Newness of the Department Store: A View from the Eighteenth Century' in G. Crossick and S. Jaumain (eds), *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850–1939* (Aldershot 1999), 46–71; and M. Hilton, 'Review Article: Class, Consumption and the Public Sphere', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35, 4 (October 2000), 655–66. J. Benson and L. Ugolini (eds), *A Nation of Shopkeepers* (London 2003).

36 A. Clarke, '“Mother Swapping”: The Trafficking of Nearly New Children's Wear' in P. Jackson, M. Lowe, D. Miller and F. Mort (eds), *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces* (New York 2000), 85–100.

lost their personal distinction and habits. Shopkeepers and sales personnel were asked to discipline their own chattiness and bad moods, and refrain from self-expression (such as the use of strong perfume), while managing customers with universal sales techniques rather than individual charm. New skills were needed to classify consumers entering the shop, to anticipate a type's desires, but also to demonstrate the meaning of consumer sovereignty by pointing towards a range of higher quality, more expensive goods.<sup>37</sup> Spiekermann's study suggests a new normative trend at the turn of the twentieth century, though, at times, a concern with retrieving the agency of retailers threatens to ignore the agency of consumers. Clearly, the changing relationship between personal and routinized interactions involved both consumers and retailers. Future research will need to explore the different ways in which shops and customers could mix elements of the universal commercial and uniquely personal, even intimate, in different areas of consumption. To what degree modernity resulted in depersonalization, as Spiekermann suggests, needs to be tested against the different forms of self-representation people perform in different arenas of consumption. As the American example of sales personnel introducing themselves by first name and place of origin suggests, there may be no linear trend or normative yardstick. Consumers (and retailers) may want to encourage personal exchange and a sense of community in a particular space — the fancy neighbourhood store which sells personal identity as much as goods — but not in others — the wholesale or outlet centre selling for price. Historians have yet to chart how different societies have developed and managed these different offerings of the consuming self.<sup>38</sup>

Any serious discussion of consumer society must trace the practices and meanings of consumption as they are woven into social structures and actions that lie beyond the shop counter. Instead of oppositional models of analysis (consumption versus production) and of sequential models (consumer society after class society), the challenge of the next generation of work will be one of integration. The study of consumption has the potential to bring together the study of work, politics, family and collective identity in fresh ways. Indeed, it needs to do so if it wants to avoid the fate of historiographical marginalization experienced by earlier 'leisure studies'.<sup>39</sup> New studies on shopping and factory meals offer new approaches for broadening the social relations of consumption.

37 Spiekerman, *Konsumgesellschaft*, op. cit., 596ff. N. Gregson and L. Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures* (forthcoming).

38 For the transition from critiques of mass consumption to its acceptance in mid-twentieth-century Germany, see most recently, D. Briesen, *Warenhaus, Massenkonsum und Sozialmoral* (Frankfurt/Main 2001), albeit with a narrow focus on select academic and conservative élites.

39 Recent historical studies of tourism have tried to capitalize on the seminal sociological works by Urry and MacCannell on the centrality of touristic sensibilities for the experiential dimension of modern consumption: S. Baranowski and E. Furlough (eds), *Being Elsewhere: Tourism, Consumer Culture and Identity in Modern Europe and North America* (Ann Arbor, MI 2001).

How much the ideological valorization of consumption has changed in the last few decades is reflected in Erika Rappaport's significant study of shopping in London's West End in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead of commercial exploitation or oppression, *Shopping for Pleasure* is a story of consumers' agency. Shopping became an emancipatory activity through which middle-class women defined a new sense of bourgeois feminine identity, carved out new public spaces, and became energized as political actors. This approach carries obvious affinities with recent theoretical interest in the 'subversive' nature of consumption.<sup>40</sup> Rappaport makes several important revisions to popular theories. Thus, the analysis of credit purchasing and legal cases regarding married women's debts reveals the significance of the legal context for familial consumption. Instead of supporting Veblen's idea of 'conspicuous consumption' as a source of social status, Rappaport shows how 'legislators, judges, and husbands perceived "excessive" consumption as potentially undoing that position'.<sup>41</sup> There is a keen eye for distinct perceptions of consumer culture within groups as well as tensions between them. The arrival of department stores divided residents and retailers alike, some anxious about its disruption of established gender roles and idyllic neighbourhoods, others greeting it as a vehicle of female improvement.

In the commercial expansion of the West End in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, both the nature of consumption and the identity of the shopper were redefined. The gaze of the *flâneuse*, developed in several magazines, extended the spatial and emotional dimension of consumption beyond the materiality of commodities. One way of reading Rappaport's book is to see here one stage in the contestation of 'the consumer' as a new social actor. Middle-class women and organizations as well as journalists, playwrights and businessmen all tried to capture 'the consumer', and in the process redefined pre-existing social identities, especially those of women. Musical comedies of the department store, Rappaport argues, 'housed socially acceptable yet erotic narratives about the mingling of classes, sexes, and money' that shaped modern identities.<sup>42</sup> Other genres distinguished between the educated *flâneuse*, whose window-shopping expanded a sense of humanity, and the irrational shopper, whose addictive pursuit of fashion resulted in a loss of individuality. Who did the women think they were? There is at times a conceptual slippage here that obfuscates the genealogy of 'the consumer' as a social identity. 'Consumers no doubt came away with many readings of the [department store] plays', Rappaport acknowledges.<sup>43</sup> But did theatre-goers necessarily see

40 J. Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston 1989) and also M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA 1984).

41 E. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton 2000), 69. See also M. Finn, 'Working-class Women and the Contest for Consumer Control in Victorian County Courts', *Past and Present*, 161 (1998), 116–54 and her forthcoming book *The Character of Credit*.

42 Rappaport, *Shopping*, op. cit., 180.

43 Ibid., 187.

themselves as 'consumers' when they went to a music hall? How did individuals respond to being bombarded with rival images and expectations of 'the consumer'? The utopian and dystopian dimensions are important in themselves, but they also alert us to the need to know more about the spectrum in between.

How the growing interest in consumption can refresh our thinking about industrial society is illustrated by Jacob Tanner in *Fabrikmahlzeit*, a highly original book on food at the industrial workplace in Switzerland in the first half of the twentieth century. The canteen functions as a prism of overlapping discourses and practices that connect work and home, individual productivity and social welfare, profit and health. Tanner encourages us to see workplace and family, production and consumption in the same frame of analysis, rather than as separate universes attracting separate communities of historians. The story begins with the scientific shift at the turn of the twentieth century from labour physiology to nutritional physiology. Whereas the first conceived of the human body in terms of energy and thermodynamics, the latter privileged a biochemical model in which hormones and vitamins provided vital signals and information. Instead of a fuel tank, the body became a communication system. Consequently, 'muscular thermodynamics' came to be less influential than previous studies of industrial modernity and Taylorism assumed.<sup>44</sup> At the workplace and beyond the factory gate, a new politics of food emerged that approached questions of productivity, social harmony and national hygiene through a nutritional programme favouring vegetables and juice and discouraging meat and alcohol. The canteen became a social laboratory for creating healthy Swiss bodies.

Tanner approaches this laboratory via two principal avenues, the work of the *Schweizer Verband Volksdienst* (SVV), founded in 1914, and the canteens at the firms of Sandoz, Ciba and Geigy. The SVV became increasingly influential in the creation and management of Swiss canteens, running well over 100 canteens in the metal and chemical industries as well as the public sector. In the 1930s, American ideas of industrial management were displaced by German fascist associations between nutrition and eugenics. Tanner shows how much the SVV's programme was transformed at the workplace by acts of resistance and stubborn cultural trends. The SVV was a pioneering advocate of self-service, which synthesized ideas of rationalization in production and individualization in demand. By 1929, 37 per cent of canteen meals were offered à la carte through self-service. But how successful was this attempt to turn workers into individual consumers with a clear sense of choice? According to Tanner, no sharp break in food culture occurred. Many workers continued to bring their food from home and found increasingly ingenious ways of heating it up at the workplace. Rather than working against familial, domestic settings, the factory canteen came to absorb family traditions, setting itself up

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44 Cf. A. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Rise of Modernity* (Berkeley, CA 1990).

as an 'alcohol-free substitute home',<sup>45</sup> in which women provided men with food. The SVV's hopes of transforming Swiss nutrition had only limited success. Canteen budgets reveal a slight but steady increase in expenditure on vegetables and fruit in the late 1920s and 1930s, and only a marginal drop in that for meat. Meal practices, too, proved resilient, as most workers were unwilling to abandon the lengthy two-hour break in the middle of the day.

The overlap of labour and consumption, of factory culture and domestic culture, poses a challenge for the picture of functional and spatial differentiation between mass consumption and mass production in the age of Taylorism. The dominant argument has been that, as capitalism switched to an intensive regime of capital accumulation in the early twentieth century, a functional and spatial separation emerged between the workplace with its task of rationalizing labour and the domestic sphere with its task of keeping workers fit and healthy by managing consumption.<sup>46</sup> Consumer culture, in this account, followed the dictates of capitalist production — the private family used the goods produced by mass production (cars, radios, washing machines, etc.). Expanding the focus of consumption beyond private acts of purchase in the market-place complicates this functionalist argument and cuts across a simple divide of work-place versus private consumption. Even in advanced capitalist societies, or perhaps especially there, collective consumption has played an important role, from public services to energy consumption to canteens. Why some forms of public consumption have proved less viable than others (such as wartime government restaurants) is a challenging question. What is clear from the role of new nutritional ideas is that consumption at the work-place shaped as well as responded to the process of production. Thus, the practice of workers taking several short breaks — a pathological sign of laziness and inefficiency under the thermodynamic model — was promoted from the mid-1930s for its contribution to superior health and productivity.<sup>47</sup>

*Fabrikmahlzeit* opens a successful dialogue between historical study and sociological models of consumption, ranging from Simmel's discussion of the meal to Bourdieu's work on habitus. In contrast to Bourdieu, Tanner shows that eating practices are not only used for 'distinction', but also have a cultural force of their own. At the same time, Tanner shows how right Bourdieu was to see food as a retarding element in social transformations, preserving older habits for which there may be little role in a changing society. Historians and pundits hanging onto notions of 'basic needs' or economic interpretations of changing consumption patterns will find a lot to chew on in this study; those proclaiming an automatic correlation between a rise in income and a rise in meat consumption might want to note that Swiss people in 1952 still consumed less meat than they did in 1922.<sup>48</sup> What is debatable is the concluding

45 J. Tanner, *Fabrikmahlzeit: Ernährungswissenschaft, Industriearbeit und Volksernährung in der Schweiz 1890–1950* (Zürich 1999), 315.

46 M. Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience* (London 1979).

47 Tanner, *Fabrikmahlzeit*, op. cit., 245ff.

48 Ibid., 160f.

thesis of a sharp break around 1950, a conviction that unnecessarily prevents Tanner from exploring continuities in Swiss consumer culture. Here the argument relies heavily on shifts in nutritional science rather than the cultural practices of eating in the work-place. As early as 1948 Tanner finds academic commentary on 'overfeeding' displacing earlier concerns about how best to manage scarcity. This conceptual shift, it is argued, had dramatic consequences for the influence of nutritional science, which, after all, had acquired its institutional power-base and social legitimation through its position at the centre of the productivist project. But how many workers in how many canteens were troubled by 'overfeeding' or 'overeating' in the 1950s and 1960s? When did state policies and consumer legislation shift priority from nutrition to obesity? And are there not significant continuities in the expansion of self-service into other areas of consumption in the second half of the twentieth century? Studies of British diet and food cultures suggest it was only in the late 1960s that significant changes took place.<sup>49</sup> Histories of West Germany in the 1950s suggest that memories of pre-war 'scarcity' continued to inform working families' understanding and evaluation of growing affluence after the war.<sup>50</sup>

What to do with politics in the study of consumption? This question has been a long-standing headache for students of modern consumer societies. In contrast to the literature on early modern 'moral economy' and popular protests, modern and contemporary historians have been slow to debate systematically the changing interface between politics and consumption. This is ironic, given the renewed importance of consumption for recent national and international social movements, as well as for some Western governments and political élites, most notably New Labour in Britain. Methodological assumptions, based on an instinctive bias towards the individual as the core unit of modern consumer society, may account for this historiographical lag. One assumption, which some economic historians continue to fall back upon, is that consumers are a messy agglomerate of utilitarian individuals with different interests and desires: they might briefly be driven to protest because of specific material grievances, but by definition any collective action is difficult to sustain. The other, more culturalist and sometimes explicitly post-structuralist approach has been to explore consumption in the construction of individual identity. What matters here is the relationship between individual lifestyle and the commercial and institutional preparation of a 'self' fit for consumer society. The focus is on governmentality, the generation of self and choice — no doubt a

49 A. Murcott, 'Food and Nutrition in Post-war Britain' in J. Obelkevich and P. Caterall (eds), *Understanding Post-war British Society* (London 1994), 155–64. Cf. D.J. Oddy, *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s* (Woodbridge, Suffolk 2003).

50 M. Wildt, *Vom kleinen Wohlstand: Eine Konsumgeschichte der fünfziger Jahre* (Frankfurt/Main 1996).



process saturated with power, but nonetheless one in which the political imaginary of consumers, their mobilization, and self-understanding as collective actors have featured rarely. Yet this focus on 'individual' and 'choice' presumes a shift from tradition/community to liberal modernity/individual that is at odds with the many occasions in modern and contemporary history when consumption has been a political site for collective mobilization concerning civil society, democracy and global justice.

The last few years have witnessed a new convergence of interest in modern consumer politics, driven partly by a broader academic and political re-discovery of civil society, partly by historians' turning away from an older male, production and class-oriented vision of social democracy, partly by attention to the politics of everyday life, family and gender.<sup>51</sup> The study by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska on *Austerity in Britain* and the collection edited by Hartmut Berghoff on *Konsumpolitik* in twentieth-century Germany now take us two steps forward in thinking about the politicization of consumption, and one step back.<sup>52</sup> The politics in which they are interested here is in the first place the state and organized party politics: how do policies affect consumption, and how do parties use consumer interest and grievances? Consumption here is more or less taken as a given and of instrumental interest. Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic*, by contrast, pursues the larger question of how mass consumption became a dominant mode of political culture and political economy in the USA after the second world war.<sup>53</sup> Here the interest is the changing meanings and functions of consumption and how these transformed the politics of space, community and, eventually, the democratic imagination itself. To a degree, the difference in these approaches reflects the different paths taken by consumer politics in these societies — but only to a degree. They also reflect the persisting force of national historiographical traditions and debates. In spite of an advancing global system of provision and debate about consumption, the primary focus of these studies is not consumer politics as a subject in its own right but as a way of answering questions about power and political culture in particular national settings.

Read next to each other, these books offer fundamentally contradictory

51 F. Mort, 'The Politics of Consumption' in S. Hall and M. Jacques (eds), *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s* (London 1989), 160–72; de Grazia, *Sex of Things*, op. cit.; Daunt and Hilton, *Politics of Consumption*, op. cit.; Strasser et al., *Getting and Spending*, op. cit.; Bevir and Trentmann, *Markets in Historical Contexts*, op. cit.; M. Bevir and F. Trentmann (eds), *Critiques of Capital in Modern Britain and America* (London 2002); M. Jacobs, '“Democracy's Third Estate”: New Deal Politics and the Construction of a “Consuming Public”', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 55 (1999), 27–51; see also the forthcoming books by L. Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–64* and M. Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-century Britain*.

52 I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939–1955* (Oxford 2000); H. Berghoff (ed.), *Konsumpolitik: die Regulierung des privaten Verbrauchs im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 1999).

53 L. Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-war America* (New York 2003).

conclusions about the state's impact on consumption. The essays in *Konsumpolitik* point to the limitations of state power and to long-term continuities in twentieth-century consumer politics across the divide of the second world war. *Austerity in Britain*, by contrast, presents the decade after 1945 as a sharp break in policy and party allegiance, manifesting itself in a new Conservative drive for markets and choice, away from wartime regulation. *A Consumers' Republic* highlights the centrality of government resources and county and state policies and regulations in sustaining and moulding a more consensual project of mass consumption as an engine of material prosperity and democratic life in postwar America.

A good argument for continuity is Christoph Nonn's discussion of agricultural policies between Weimar and the Federal Republic — here the first world war, rather than 1945, emerges as a decisive break, as the memories of hunger create a new consensus of regulatory politics.<sup>54</sup> Agricultural policies, he emphasizes, cannot simply be understood in terms of élite lobbying but reflect a shift in sentiment within popular parties, including the Social Democrats, who by the 1920s were pressing for a politics of productivity. This fits in well with a significant shift in opinion amongst organized labour and consumer movements in Britain in the same period, away from free trade towards trade regulation to reconcile producer and consumer interests.<sup>55</sup> Speitkamp's discussion of censorship and youth culture in the first half of the twentieth century finds a persistent gulf between the realities of expanding consumer culture and the unwillingness of political and cultural élites to entrust taste and choice to the market. Nineteen forty-five did not amount to a sharp break in popular attitudes to advertising either, as Berghoff's critical evaluation of the profession's role in the nazi and postwar years makes clear. These chapters are forceful reminders of the danger of positing some natural, essential consumer society. Businessmen, politicians and bureaucrats turned to regulation with a specific view of how consumer society worked and could be moulded. Yet they often generated the very opposite consumption patterns from those intended; nazi hopes to limit consumer demand by advertising about scarce resources instead drew attention to these goods and exacerbated bottlenecks. How contradictory consumer policies could be is illustrated in Schröter's discussion of the young Federal Republic in the 1950s. Here clothes and food retailing were deregulated, but energy, housing and transport were not. For Ludwig Erhard, markets and competition offered a substitute for a genuine consumer policy, although even this was compromised by cartel legislation (1952) which allowed some vertical price-fixing favouring producers and traders at the expense of consumers. German competition policy was distinctly shaped by ordo-liberal ideas, equipped with tough laws, and, arguably, more centrally

54 C. Nonn, 'Vom Konsumentenprotest zum Konsens: Lebensmittelverbraucher und Agrarpolitik in Deutschland, 1900–1950' in Berghoff (ed.), *Konsumpolitik*, op. cit., 23–46.

55 Trentmann, 'Bread, Milk and Democracy' in Dauntton and Hilton, *Politics of Consumption*, op. cit.

connected to debates about democracy than in postwar Britain where it was more an administrative arm of the state seeking to advance efficiency.<sup>56</sup>

*Austerity in Britain* is more tightly drawn around a specific aspect of consumer politics: the rationing of basic consumption in Britain during and after the second world war, its administration, social consequences and growing politicization. Zweiniger-Bargielowska takes on the myth of the 'postwar consensus'.<sup>57</sup> As her detailed reconstruction of popular attitudes shows, far from universally accepting continued rationing after the second world war with a stiff upper lip, a growing number of British people turned against it. The groundswell of rising frustration, especially pronounced amongst women, favoured the Conservative revival in the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>58</sup> Put differently, Labour's fair shares policies, far from symbolizing the popularity of the welfare state and shared sacrifice moulded in wartime, were deeply unfair and, from an electoral point of view, suicidal, as voters turned to Conservative candidates promising choice and free markets.

The question with these points is not whether they are separately true, but what do they mean in a longer and comparative framework? There is little engagement with the multidisciplinary field of consumer studies. Gender is given argumentative privilege, although much of the evidence suggests equally interesting divisions by generation, region, income and skill. Housewives were worse off than their husbands under rationing, but this is hardly surprising. It is well documented that food consumption in working-class families in previous free market situations was also highly gendered and hierarchical.<sup>59</sup> The question is: did rationing exacerbate this gendered inequity and was it experienced as doing so? Labour's fair share policies, likewise, might have been removed in practice from ideals of egalitarianism, and not have been universally popular. Yet this does not necessarily mean that there was a general loss of public faith in controls. In an ideal world, few people would voluntarily choose rationing, so the question becomes by whose standards was British rationing popular or unpopular?

*Austerity in Britain* is most impressive when using social surveys and opinion polls to chart shifts in popular opinion. Here evidence does not always

56 See D. Gerber, *Law and Competition in Twentieth-century Europe: Protecting Prometheus* (Oxford 2001); S. Wilks, *In the Public Interest: Competition Policy and the Monopolies and Mergers Commission* (Manchester 1999).

57 See also H. Jones and M. Kandiah (eds), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945–64* (Basingstoke 1996).

58 How much of this is a causal correlation? As Labour's increase of the vote from 47.8 per cent in 1945 to 48.8 per cent in 1951 suggests, rationing and controls did not hurt Labour; the Conservatives did increase theirs from 39.8 per cent to 48 per cent, but this gain was made largely by absorbing the Liberal vote. As Zweiniger-Bargielowska points out, the swing in 1951 to the Conservatives was more pronounced amongst women than men. Yet, to what degree was this relative decline in female Labour preference since 1945 due to austerity, and to what degree was it a return to pre-war patterns with 1945 being the aberrant outcome? As she acknowledges, it was only in 1945 that Labour had ever obtained a small lead among female voters.

59 E. Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford 1993).

provide conclusive answers, however. Some polls point to a remarkable degree of continued popularity for controls. As late as 1953 a Gallup poll revealed 43 per cent opposed to the gradual disappearance of rationing, with 47 per cent in favour<sup>60</sup> — many democratic parties form governments with less support. This was far from a dramatic sea-change from wartime opinion. In 1942, for example, 49 per cent wanted a continuation of rationing.<sup>61</sup> Women in the co-operative and labour movements organized mass demonstrations and petitions in support of controls in 1953–54. Observers from societies like Japan, also keen to curb spending and promote saving, found the degree of acceptance of rationing in Britain mind-boggling.<sup>62</sup> How many politicians in other societies have dared to implement austerity measures after a total war and managed to win the next election?

In addition to the popularity of a particular consumer policy, it might be useful, then, to ask about solidarity, compliance and legitimacy — that is, the willingness of people to accept a political framework as legitimate and to live by its rules without challenging the authority and social norms of the community. How do individual feelings translate into individual and collective action? Opinion polls are poor guides for this process, as the frequent gulf between consumer opinions and behaviour makes amply clear; most people indicate a preference for organic food, but very few buy it. Postwar Britain may not have generated a ‘consensus’ about policies but was perhaps nonetheless a society distinguished by a marked degree of cohesion and willingness to accept sacrifices without opting for wide-spread protests, violence or criminalization; even black markets in Britain were distinguished by a high sense of morality and social conscience.<sup>63</sup> This contrasts significantly, for example, with the charged street politics and violent attacks on privileged consumers, shopkeepers and Jews in Germany during and after the first world war. To understand this, however, the study of consumer politics must connect material patterns of everyday life to the ideas and values which provide them with political meaning and direct their collective action.

From this perspective, how much of a break in consumer politics are the immediate postwar years? Arguably, the debate about austerity resumed and sharpened an earlier divide between proponents of regulation and choice, institutional co-ordination and market, that had erupted during the first world war and widened in the interwar years. Tories absorbed the remaining Liberal free traders but made sure to complement their attack on rationing with trade

60 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity*, op. cit., 87. The evidence, largely taken from opinion polls and social surveys, is ambivalent and inconclusive, with high instances of ‘don’t know’ or ‘unable to say’.

61 Ibid., 115.

62 See S. Garon, ‘Savings Promotion and the Dissemination of Economic Knowledge: Transnational Insights from the Japanese Experience’ in M. Daunton and F. Trentmann (eds), *Worlds of Political Economy* (forthcoming).

63 See M. Roodhouse, ‘Black Market Activity in Britain, 1939–1955’, Cambridge PhD thesis 2003.

controls and subsidies in other spheres of the economy. Labour consolidated its programme of controls, with sections of the party seeking to design a direct consumer policy and supporting state agencies, like the Council of Industrial Design, in their effort to 'rationalize' consumer habits.<sup>64</sup> New arrivals, like the Consumers' Association, developed further the interwar interest in consumer information and protection. In contrast to the late Victorian and Edwardian free trade settlement, the consumer interest was now politically and culturally fragmented, with different meanings and spokespeople, and no longer at the centre of political economy and political culture.

The middle of the twentieth century, arguably, sees a role reversal in the status of the consumer in the political imagination in Britain and America. Whereas consumption (and the representation of consumers) came to play a fragmented and subordinate role in the British political system,<sup>65</sup> in America, as Lizabeth Cohen shows, the opposite dynamic was at work: mass consumption moved to the centre of American politics — and in due course transformed the nature of politics. The creation of '*A Consumer's Republic*', in Cohen's words, became the consensual political project of the postwar years, promising Americans greater prosperity, equality and freedom. This is less a story of sharp breaks than one of a series of organic mutations between different settlements of consumer politics. Citizenship and consumption are omnipresent categories, rather than successive ideal-types, but the respective weight and functional relationship between them change in these three settlements. Cohen's account takes us from the ideal of 'citizen consumer' of the New Deal, where consumption was informed by collective interests, to 'the purchaser as citizen' of the Consumers' Republic, where the individual pursuit of mass consumption would benefit the public interest, to that of the 'consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter' of the Consumerized Republic, where politics itself is viewed as a market.

It would be too easy (politically and historically) to subsume this account under a narrative of 'economic imperialism' in which the ideas and practice of a liberal market increasingly colonize other spheres of politics and society. Inevitably, this book is written within the context of a long-standing and distinctive American debate about whether consumer culture undermines democracy and community.<sup>66</sup> Politicians' appropriation of the language of markets and the invasion of marketing knowledge and market sensibilities into

64 For this, see C. Beauchamp, 'Getting Your Money's Worth: American Models for the Remaking of the Consumer Interest in Britain, 1930s–1960s' in Bevir and Trentmann, *Critiques of Capital*, op. cit., 127–50.

65 M. Hilton, 'Consumer Politics in Post-war Britain' in Dauntton and Hilton, *Politics of Consumption*, op. cit., 241–59; Hilton, *Consumerism*, op. cit.

66 J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (London 1969); J. Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer* (New York 1998); R. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (Princeton, NJ 1999); M. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge, MA 1996); A. Schäfer, 'German Historicism, Progressive Social Thought, and the Interventionist State in the US Since the 1880s' in Bevir and Trentmann, *Markets in Historical Contexts*, op. cit., chap. 8.

political culture form the end-point of this study. Its main historical contribution, however, is in unravelling the political dynamics behind the confluence of consumption and citizenship at a micro and macro level of power and social relations. The Consumer's Republic created a broad consensual agreement in a vision of society in which American citizens enjoyed greater affluence and freedom by participating in a mass consumption economy. This 'consensus', however, never amounted to political stasis. It was neither a natural, self-sustaining economic arrangement, nor did it preclude contestation. Cohen shows masterfully how the ideal of the ever-expanding American pie with growing slices for all changed in shape and distribution as the realities of class, race and gender came to structure mass consumption. Her discussion does for consumer politics what the 'systems of provision' approach has done for consumer goods:<sup>67</sup> it follows consumer politics from early ideas to their contestation and implementation as policies, to what we might call the social and political externalities of mass consumption. The spatial dimensions of mass consumer culture are a crucial link in the chain of analysis. At the level of federal policies concerning taxation and mortgage guarantees, she shows how the ideal of greater equality in a dynamic mass consumption economy was compromised from the beginning by inegalitarian, gendered social policies, such as the GI Bill. At the level of local politics, suburbanization and localism made for class and racial segregation. Public spaces became regulated or eliminated altogether. In turn, the spatial reconfiguration of consumption fed back into a revised image of 'the consumer' in the 1950s. The previously dominant female representation of the shopper was giving way to 'Mr Consumer', whose name is on the mortgage, who drives with his wife to the mall, and who controls access to credit. For Cohen, this regendering was symptomatic of the broader transmutation of the public-minded female citizen-consumer into the male purchaser as citizen.

Cohen's emphasis on the negative social and political externalities of the Consumer's Republic, however, is balanced by her appreciation of how its egalitarian ideals also legitimized grass roots struggles for civic rights and social inclusion. Above all, African-Americans' battle against discrimination made effective use of the new convergence of citizenship and consumption by demanding their share in a mass consumer society; here, too, there was a political commodification of space as civil rights' groups defined housing as one of the most "basic consumer goods".<sup>68</sup> These campaigns' achievements became difficult to maintain, however, once public accommodations were jeopardized by suburbanization.

Politics here stretches beyond a functional connection between material interest and party-political preferences to an inquiry into the consequences of

<sup>67</sup> Fine, *World of Consumption*, op. cit.

<sup>68</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, op. cit., 175. For the civil rights' politics of the NCL in the 1930s, see Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, op. cit.; for the 1960s, see F. Kornbluh, 'To Fulfil their "Rightly Needs": Consumerism and the National Welfare Rights Movement', *Radical History Review*, 69 (1997), 76–113.



a system of mass consumption for the political deliberation of public questions and for social inclusion and exclusion. For all its emancipatory potential, *A Consumers' Republic* leaves behind a negative balance sheet. It is a social-democratic, historical pendant to communitarian analyses of the erosion of American community and civil society.<sup>69</sup> As a historian, Cohen places little hope in the communitarian vision of disentangling the long-term intertwining of citizenship and consumption. She is at pains to emphasize how mass politics can generate common ideals, a theme of her earlier work.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, there is a good deal of shared diagnostics. The economic recession after 1973 exposed how skin-deep and fragmented the public interest had become under the previous regime of mass consumption. Reaganism reaped the benefits of the historical convergence of consumption and citizenship. The 'consumer' had become a dominant identity of self-interest and personal entitlement. Americans have degenerated into a nation of shoppers, shopping for politics just as they shopped for goods.

This approach to consumer politics opens up several vistas, but it also, perhaps, shuts off others. Cohen introduces an important historical dimension to the current debate about neo-liberal hegemony. Rather than presenting neo-liberalism as a paradigmatic shift in political culture in the age of deregulation and Reagan, she traces a long-term fragmentation of public politics to the proliferation of suburban malls and the application of market segmentation by politicians in the 1960s. The book's second achievement is to contribute to present work seeking to place consumer movements within political economy, rather than following a social movement narrative casting consumer advocates as opponents of a dominant regime. Naderism here emerges as much a symptom of the Consumer's Republic as its proffered cure, reinforcing both the consensual ideal of mass consumption that marginalized alternative reform projects and the fragmentation of entrepreneurial interest politics. For all its strengths, this narrative obscures, perhaps unnecessarily, the growing contribution of international developments to consumer politics. The debate about GATT in the 1980s sparked a rediscovery of global issues for American consumer advocates. There has been a vibrant debate about global trade, environmental issues and civil society amongst consumer movements in America as elsewhere. *Consumers' International* has been an influential forum for reintroducing questions of social justice. In Japan in the last two decades, consumption has become an increasingly strong social and political movement as well as a cultural formation.<sup>71</sup> In China, the communist party state's endorsement of 'the consumer' as an essential agent in modernization in the

69 See here especially, R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York 2000); cf. the debate in R. Kuttner (ed.), *Ticking Time Bombs: The New Conservative Assaults on Democracy* (New York 1996).

70 L. Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge 1990).

71 J. Clammer, *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption* (Oxford 1997); Maclachlan, *Consumer Politics in Post-war Japan*, op. cit.

1990s has opened up new (and often unintended oppositional) spaces for political action and association.<sup>72</sup> These developments, and the way in which consumption has become linked to questions of identity, fit poorly the concluding image of the consumer's having descended from being the voice of collective interests to the pursuer of personal entitlement.

*A Consumers' Republic* also raises a question about the causal correlation between mass consumption and public political apathy, which calls for more comparative work along the lines of Almond and Verba's earlier project on civic culture.<sup>73</sup> Concern about selfishness replacing a commitment to collective interests, and a decline in political engagement are as old as history.<sup>74</sup> Yet why necessarily presume a trade-off between a sense of personal entitlement and a sense of social commitment? People might become more involved and assertive consumers because they feel a sense of entitlement *and* because they want to support their community.<sup>75</sup> Finally, the anti-Whiggish account of the fragmentation of the American republic raises questions about the public spirit Americans lost. How collective, how public, how open, how shared was politics before the confluence of citizenship and consumption? There is sometimes an asymmetry in historical method here. The sensitivity attached to the changing meanings of the consumer, the critical questioning who is imagined by whom and who not, who had power in constructing which image and who did not, is rarely extended to the meaning of 'citizenship' or 'the public', which are left standing as if they possess some essential meaning that does not require equal historicization. There is an implicit, debatable assumption that, prior to the transmutation of consumer politics into consumerized politics, there was a lot more of the shared public space and common stake on which a vibrant democracy depends. Yet is this not somehow at odds with the growing appeal of consumer politics for social movements in the first half of the twentieth century as the very instruments for overcoming barriers to full democracy, social justice and material well-being?

Consumer culture is at the centre of contemporary debates about freedom, identity and social justice. These debates have been most advanced in

72 D. Davis (ed.), *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley, CA 2000).

73 G.A. Almond and S. Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ 1963).

74 J. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (London 1997).

75 Since I wrote this article, a recent Mori survey for the National Consumer Council in Britain found an almost even balance of motivations behind consumer activism: 24 per cent of responses were 'to support the community', 23 per cent 'to help other people', 22 per cent 'got very angry about service provided', and 20 per cent 'to help support myself/my family'. NCC, *Consumer Activism Omnibus Survey* (London 2002). Note, this research presented the people polled with a ready definition of the consumer 'whether this is as a shopper, a patient, a passenger, or someone who uses water and energy services', reflecting trends discussed above. It would be interesting to know to what degree people themselves have incorporated this broadening of consumer identity.

geography, sociology and cultural studies. Historians' early interest focused on two phenomena: the birth of consumer society in early modern Western Europe and the Atlantic world, and the spread of 'modern' consumerism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This article has argued for expanding the focus of historical enquiry into consumption and for critically re-examining the concepts and periodization underlying it. The task ahead is to write histories of consumption, not consumerism. Consumerism, or the lure of material goods for individuals, is only one point on a broad cultural spectrum in which consumption operates in modern and contemporary societies. The consumption of basic goods (water, grain, meat) continues to be a vital subject of identity and politics in societies which do not lack the disposable income for hedonism. Likewise 'mass' consumer society was only one particular social formation, particularly prominent around the mode of production of certain goods and not others. Two related problems have been highlighted: first, the danger of writing a stage narrative of consumption through a supposed transition from need to desire; second, that of framing the analysis in terms of the global expansion of a particular western type of consumption. Instead of working within a self-defined theory of mass consumer society or modern consumer society, historians now need to contextualize the different forms and functions of consumption, and the affiliated social visions and political systems competing with each other at the same time. This requires a more ambitious and ecumenical view of consumption, no longer limited to shopping and the market but looking beyond to what sociologists have called 'ordinary consumption', to social services and to systems of public provision.

A new generation of historical work is emerging, seeking to weave consumption back into social and political processes. Yet there remains a notable tension between what has remained a predominantly national frame of analysis and what is after all a subject and process of transnational nature. There is, then, a considerable gulf between the study of commodities through a global system of provisions and historians' preferred study of consumer societies in a national setting. National studies can reveal the significance of particular traditions in moulding consumption and weaving it into the social and political fabric. Sticking too solidly to national frames of analysis, however, risks reinforcing national historiographical subjects and debates, rather than leading to a new dialogue about consumer societies in different settings. What is needed now is greater awareness of transnational and comparative processes, so that historians of different consumer societies can discuss questions of convergence and divergence, consumption and citizenship, and the changing meanings and functions of consumption in the modern and contemporary period.

There can be little doubt that the boundaries of 'consumption' and 'the consumer', as a subject and identity, expanded enormously in the course of the twentieth century, from goods to services, and from personal wants and social justice to questions of political governance — and did so with different speed and ambition in different societies. This inflation of 'consumption' and 'con-

sumer' poses a challenge as well as an opportunity for historians. If everything is now consumption — from a museum visit to a hospital stay — the subject risks becoming too broad for any meaningful analysis. What historians can contribute in wrestling with this eternal dilemma of consumer studies is to show how we need to be more sensitive to the ways and contexts in which historical actors have appropriated languages of consumption to make sense of their actions and described themselves and others as 'consumers'. There is need for a greater and more subtle distinction between the processes that we, as historians, want to describe as purchases, digestion or services (all consumption now) and the activities and subjects which historical subjects themselves thought of as consumption, and the boundaries that distinguished these from other spheres of life.

Frank Trentmann

is Senior Lecturer in Modern History at Birkbeck College, University of London, and director of the Cultures of Consumption research programme. His most recent publications include the interdisciplinary volume, co-edited with Mark Bevir, *Markets in Historical Contexts: Ideas and Politics in the Modern World* (Cambridge 2004). He is currently finishing a book on consumption, citizenship and free trade, and co-editing with John Brewer an international volume on consumer cultures.